(b)(1)
(b)(3)

SECRET

APPROVED FOR RELEASE
DATE: OCT 2005

CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY
National Foreign Assessment Center

30 May 1979

MEMORANDUM

IRAQI-SYRIAN RAPPROCHEMENT

The seven-month-old Iraqi-Syrian rapprochement lacks deep political roots, but is continuing under the impetus provided by the Egyptian peace initiative and instability in Iran. Additional selective cooperation, including military, is likely. Should the Egyptian-Israeli negotiations on the future of the West Bank and Gaza achieve a settlement acceptable to most significant Palestinian elements and should Israel satisfy Syrian demands regarding the return of the Golan Heights, motivation of both parties for pursuing unity would fade away. Some of the noncontroversial aspects of reconciliation, especially in the economic area, could prove more lasting if both sides wish to share the benefits of a normal relationship rather than return to the status quo ante.

The Camp David Accords shocked the Iraqis into action to end their bitter feud with Syria. Since the Sadat visit to Jerusalem, the Iraqis have worried that the Egyptian initiative would ultimately produce a comprehensive peace, leaving a rejectionist Iraq isolated and without significant allies. The strong Arab backlash to the Accords gave Baghdad an opportunity to end its isolation without having to make major adjustments in its own hard line position on a Middle East peace settlement. The Arab center moved toward Iraq, while Iraqi Baathists made only minor concessions toward former Arab moderates.

[redacted]

PA M 79-10234

[redacted]

SECRET

[redacted]

The Iraqi strategy began with an effort to organize an Arab consensus against the peace terms negotiated by President Sadat. A necessary first step was to end the open hostility between Iraq and its long-time rival, Syria. To achieve this, Baghdad was willing--for the first time--to drop public objections to Syria's acceptance of the principle of negotiations as a permissible way to recover Arab territory. Rejectionist rhetoric, however, continues to permeate Iraqi pronouncements, suggesting that this accommodation represents nothing more than a temporary tactical adjustment of Iraq's views on a Middle East peace.

There are economic and military inducements for the Syrians to proceed with a normalization of relations with Iraq. With Egypt neutralized and a large part of the Syrian army in Lebanon, Syria's military position vis-a-vis Israel is untenable. The combined weight of the Syrian and Iraqi military establishments would provide Damascus with some negotiating leverage and enhanced military credibility. From the economic standpoint, Syria has begun to benefit from a resumption of normal commercial contacts. Rapprochement also encourages prompt payment to Syria of the Iraqi portion of the Baghdad summit financial pledge; Iraqi payments to date have amounted to about $180 million.

Baghdad's motivation to make up with Syria goes beyond pan-Arab aspirations. Iraqi Baathists were anxiously eyeing Iran during the last half of 1978. Continued confrontation with Syria was dangerous, given the potential that the unfolding unrest in Iran could spill across the 700 mile border with Iran and infect Iraqi Shias and Kurds. The Iraqis were also concerned about growing Soviet influence in the Middle East. Although the Soviets in the past have urged Syrian-Iraqi rapprochement, Moscow is clearly concerned that the reconciliation may work to its disadvantage, for, to the extent that reconciliation strengthens the partners, they need pay less heed to the USSR.

The Iraqi-Syrian rapprochement was sealed during President Assad's trip to Baghdad last October. Assad and Iraqi President Bakr signed a Charter for Joint National Action setting up machinery to coordinate movement toward unity. The Charter established a Higher Political Committee

composed of Assad, Bakr, Saddam Husayn, and several other senior Syrian and Iraqi officials. This committee, which is supposed to meet about every three months, oversees the work of four sub-committees on military cooperation, economic relations, political and information affairs, and education and scientific matters.

Unlike previous state-to-state marriages in the Arab world, the Iraqis and Syrians seem prepared to carry on a long courtship before taking the final vows. Both sides have taken a gradual approach to the negotiations and have avoided unrealistic declarations of unity. Damascus and Baghdad, however, probably prefer a cautious approach for different reasons. Iraq, the more enthusiastic of the two would-be partners, is confident that Iraq's natural strengths would eventually allow it to become the dominant partner in any union with Syria. Syrian leaders, for their part, remain deeply distrustful of Iraqi Baathists and view drawn out negotiations as an opportunity to enjoy some of the fruits of normal relations with Baghdad without having to get too involved with the Iraqis. This kind of negotiating game has its limits, however, although they are not likely to be reached as long as the external forces that started the rapprochement prevail. In time, Baghdad may run out of patience with Syria's stalling tactics, or Damascus, unable to overcome its basic mistrust, may have to break off with its ardent suitor.

The only meeting of the Higher Political Committee took place last January in Damascus and did not make any notable progress. Bakr even found an excuse not to attend. In the meantime, the subcommittees have met frequently and produced some tangible common benefits. In the area of foreign affairs, the two countries have effectively coordinated the drive to punish President Sadat for signing the peace treaty with Israel. The skillful Iraqi management of the Arab ministerial meeting in Baghdad last March achieved a surprisingly tough set of sanctions against Egypt. Since then the Iraqis and Syrians have worked vigorously to ensure there is full Arab compliance with the Baghdad conference resolutions.

Iraq and Syria also played a key role in ending the fighting in Yemen last February. They not only helped calm a peripheral Arab squabble that threatened to detract from Baghdad's and Damascus' goal of organizing a united stand against Egypt, but also enhanced Syrian-Iraqi influence in the Arabian Peninsula at the expense of Saudi Arabia.

Military Cooperation

Syria and Iraq appear to have made some progress in military cooperation particularly in the areas of planning and procurement. The two have exchanged high level staff, air force, and air defense delegations. Senior Iraqi army officers have toured possible deployment areas in the Golan and others have examined possible routes to the Golan for an Iraqi expeditionary force. The two countries reportedly have drawn up joint lists of their weapons and planned procurement in order to establish a joint fund for procurement.

In view of the antagonisms between the Syrian and Iraqi leaderships, only a strong belief that military support was needed would lead Damascus to allow substantial numbers of Iraqi troops on its soil. There is no concrete evidence that Damascus has made such a decision. Tenuous evidence indicates that Iraq may be prepositioning some spare parts and ammunition in Syria. There has been, however, a considerable strengthening of Iraqi air defenses along the borders with Syria and Jordan, a move which would enhance Baghdad's ability to undertake closer cooperation quickly should the political atmosphere improve.

For the future, Damascus must weigh the military advantages that collaboration with Iraq would give it vis-a-vis Israel against the political disadvantages of having rival Baathists potentially active in Syria.

--Joint planning would facilitate the movement of Iraqi forces to the Golan and, more importantly, increase their effectiveness once they arrived.

--Prepositioning spare parts and ammunition would greatly lessen the logistic requirements for Iraqi forces moving to the Golan. Any material already moved would not be subject to Israeli interdiction. Moreover, Syria would have possession of the material no matter what happens to political relations with Baghdad.

--Joint exercises would improve Syrian and Iraqi air and ground forces' ability to cooperate in wartime.

--The greatest military advantage to both countries in the event of war with Israel would come from the prepositioning of large numbers of Iraqi combat forces in Syria. As mentioned above, the stationing of Iraqi forces in Syria would have political implications for Damascus. The stationing of forces would raise tensions in the area and be viewed with alarm by Israel--such that Israel might preempt such an attempt to station significant Iraqi forces in Syria.

The unity talks have also produced visible results in the economic area. Trade and commercial contacts have increased. Iraq and Syria have agreed to reopen the oil pipeline that runs from northern Iraq across Syria to the Mediterranean. Although the agreement to reopen the line, closed since April 1976, only calls for operation at about one-quarter capacity, Syria still stands to gain about $21 million annually in transit fees. Baghdad, desirous of maintaining flexible and secure routes for exporting its oil, has gained another direct outlet to the Mediterranean.

Barriers to Unity

The obstacles to an Iraqi-Syrian political union seem insurmountable over the long term. The two sides have been rivals in the Fertile Crescent for centuries. Political competition since the Baath Party split in 1966 has bred deep seated distrust and jealousies. Opposing National Commands--the highest party authority--have existed in Baghdad and Damascus for more than a decade. Each side claims to be the legitimate representative of pan-Arab

Baathism and in pursuit of these claims, each has sponsored coup plots and assassinations that are not easily forgotten. Indeed, it is unlikely that either side has completely abandoned its subversive contacts and operations against the other in case the impetus for cooperation wanes.

Damascus does not share the general perception that it is the junior partner in the relationship with Baghdad. President Assad probably regards the Charter for Joint National Action with Iraq as a marriage of convenience dictated by external conditions that can easily be dissolved. Assad has always wanted to enjoy the military, economic, and political benefits of a normal relationship with Baghdad, but he remains deeply suspicious of Iraq's intentions and will avoid too tight an embrace.

Both Damascus and Baghdad are convinced of their own importance in the region and are determined not to surrender what they each perceive as their own leading role. This fundamental difference in perception acts as a barrier to real unity since neither side wants to give up its aspirations to Arab leadership.

Baath Party unity appears to be the main stumbling block in the negotiation. The Iraqis have pushed hard on party unity, despite Syrian reluctance to discuss the topic. The cautious Assad is probably worried that party consolidation would upset his control of the Syrian Baath, whose military and security branches are dominated by members of Assad's minority Alawite Muslim sect.

Religious sectarianism also works against unity; an Iraqi-Syrian combination would produce an insoluble mix of Islamic divisions. A Sunni Muslim minority rules in Baghdad, while a Shia offshoot, Alawite sect governs in Damascus. Many of the minority Syrian Alawites probably fear that the Iraqi Baathists would support a bid for power by Syria's majority Sunni population. For their part, Iraq's majority Shia Arabs would probably resent having their potential influence diminished. The Sunni dominated Baghdad leadership has used a carrot and stick policy to keep local Shias in

line. Now, given the possibility of spillover from Iran, the Baathists might be prepared to be especially solicitous in order to win Shia loyalty to the secular regime and damp down any possible thoughts Iraqi Shias might have of following the example of their rebellious Iranian coreligionists.

Syrian and Iraqi attitudes toward the peace process also continue to divide the two states. While both reject the Camp David Accords, Syria has not retracted its support for UN Resolutions 242 and 338. Assad has publicly reiterated Syrian backing for a comprehensive Middle East peace agreement on several occasions since the conclusion of the Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty. The Syrians have ruled out participation in the Camp David process but continue to support the principle of a negotiated settlement with Israel in a UN context. Baghdad, for its part, continues to adhere to a rejectionist policy and has not accepted Resolution 242.

These differences are muted for the moment because of common opposition to the Camp David Accords. If the emphasis of the peace process were to shift to another context such as the UN, however, Syrian-Iraqi differences might well reemerge and cause a disruption in the rapprochement.

Another point of dispute between Syria and Iraq is use of Euphrates River water resources. This geopolitical problem has defied solution for decades because of uncoordinated, unilateral development by the three riparian states--Syria, Iraq, and Turkey. Long-term competition for this scarce resource seem chronic, and neither of the two upper Euphrates countries has demonstrated much consideration for downstream user needs in planning its own river development projects.

Although these almost certainly preclude establishment of an enduring political union between Iraq and Syria, they do not prohibit significant cooperation on selected issues for the near term. Perhaps even some form of political unity will be worked out, but if so, it is likely to be symbolic, devoid of institutional strength, and extremely fragile. The degree of cooperation already achieved has had a major impact on the Arab reaction to the Egyptian-Israeli treaty and is likely to continue to play a negative role in

the peace process. Continued Iraqi-Syrian rapprochement could also contribute to additional cooperation among eastern Arabs. Jordan, the PLO, and Saudi Arabia, for example, are exploring closer political and military coordination among themselves and with Syria and Iraq.